



106: Epistolary by cali-chan

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And that's how Mike found himself pretty much stalking the mailman every morning before school.

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Mike walked into the house, making sure to close the door quickly behind him so as not to let the late-October chill in. His legs still hurt from the trek up Weathertop, but he was used to it by now. Having to climb up that hill every afternoon was a major pain, but Cerebro was still his best way of contacting El; he could use the phone, sure, but that was always a gamble, considering his family's general lack of respect for things like privacy.

He sighed to himself as he rested his back against the front door for a moment. It had only been a couple of weeks since El and the Byers left Hawkins, but already it was getting harder to keep as much contact with them as he would like. He had to contend with Dustin for Cerebro time, and on top of that he had to organize each call around schoolwork, family and friends. On school nights, he had to be back home by dinnertime, and even when he didn't have a curfew, soon it would start getting too cold for him to be able to stay out there for too long past sundown, anyway.

Not that he was complaining, necessarily. He'd gladly do all that and more just to get to talk to El for one minute. Whenever he talked to her, got to tell her what was going on in his life and hear her talk about her housemates, what she'd learned in her lessons that day, or what new song she'd heard on her favorite radio station, it felt almost like she was with him. Just hearing her voice made him feel recharged, like the sound of that airy giggle of hers that he loved was enough to put color back into a desaturated world.

The problem came when their communication was over and out, and

he felt the El-shaped hole in his life more strongly than ever. Because as close as he felt to her when they were talking over the radio, the truth was she was far away; far where he couldn't touch her, couldn't hold her, couldn't kiss her. He missed her so much.

He had thought this separation would be easier. And it *was* easier, at least a little— he didn't feel completely despondent as he had that first year when everybody thought Eleven had died. This time he knew she was alive and well, and he didn't need to worry about her safety, and he could still talk to her relatively often and maybe see her again fairly soon if their holiday plans went well. But just because it was easier didn't mean it didn't still suck.

It felt like everything in Hawkins reminded him of her, somehow; every time something fun or interesting happened, he'd turn to look for her so he could tell her all about it, but of course she was never there. It was hard, and with every day that went by it was going to get harder and harder. Thanksgiving felt like an eternity away.

He let his head fall back against the wood of the door with a groan. The resulting thump must've been louder than it felt because a few seconds later his mother's voice floated out from the kitchen. "Michael, is that you?"

"Yeah," he replied, his throat still a little rough from biking home in the cold.

"Dinner's almost ready!" his mom called out in response. "If you're going to be in the basement or up in your room, be sure to keep the door open so you hear me when I call you down." Mike wasn't surprised by the request; this was an argument they'd been having every other day for years.

He looked dispassionately at the stairs in front of him. Truth be told, he *had* been thinking of going up to his room and holing up there at least until dinner, but with his thighs still screaming at him from the climb up the hill, pushing himself up two flights of stairs just to mope in private lost a lot of its appeal. He decided instead to head to the kitchen. Maybe his mother would let him steal a bite of whatever she was making.

Judging by the smell, he guessed she had some kind of pasta in the oven, but as he walked into the room, he saw his mother was at the counter, working on the garlic bread. Figuring he'd wait until the bread was out of the toaster oven to try and sneak some, he sat down at the kitchen table to wait. His mom looked up at him as he did; it was a fleeting glance in between lining up slices of bread onto a toaster oven rack, but she must've noticed something in his expression, because the first question out of her mouth was, "Something wrong?"

A quick "Nothing" was on the tip of his tongue, but for some reason, he thought better about saying it. Maybe it was just this downbeat mood he was in today, but a part of him had been looking for advice on this situation for a while, and unfortunately not that many people in his life could help with that. He didn't really know that many people who had or currently were experiencing similar circumstances in their relationship.

Normally he'd go to Nancy, but she was pretty much in the same boat as him given that Jonathan had moved away as well, and he didn't want to make her feel worse by reminding her of it if it wasn't absolutely necessary. He could talk to Dustin, he supposed, but he wasn't sure his friend would really understand how Mike was feeling; Dusty-bun and Suzie-poo's relationship didn't seem particularly deep, at least from the outside looking in. They had fun, sure, and he was glad Dustin had found someone— it did wonders for his self-esteem— but they hadn't been through the kinds of situations he and El had gone through together. Plus, Mike kind of thought that Dustin got a kick out of the distance separating him from his girlfriend; it gave him a reason to keep tinkering with Cerebro every other week.

So he had a limited pool from which to draw here, and that's probably why he found himself even *contemplating* talking to his mother about this. But he really, really wanted someone to help him figure out how to deal with, well, *missing her* so bad that it hurt. If he had to go to one of his parents for once... well, at least this was the lesser of the two evils.

"Hey, Mom," he started hesitantly. His mother looked up at him again and gave him a quick smile in acknowledgment as she put the rack with the bread into the toaster oven. "Have you ever been in a long-

distance relationship?"

The toaster oven door closed with a snap. "Yes..." his mom replied, stretching out the syllable as if unsure where the question was coming from. Then she turned to him with a surprised expression on her face; it went on for long enough that Mike began to squirm under the silent scrutiny punctuated by raised brows. "Is this about that girl you kept visiting all summer?" she finally asked, grabbing a tea towel she'd left lying on the counter nearby and wiping her hands with it.

It was Mike's turn to be shocked. "How did you—"

"Please, Michael, I'm not *completely* clueless," his mother answered his question before he could even finish formulating it. Satisfied with the cleanliness of her hands, she dropped the tea towel back on the countertop and walked around the kitchen peninsula until she was standing directly in front of him.

Reclining slightly against the edge of the counter, she added, "Hopper's girl, right? The one Joyce took in after he..." Her words trailed off, clearly unwilling to invoke the death of their chief of police in what most of the town thought was a freak fire at Starcourt Mall.

Figuring there was no point in denying it if she already knew, he nodded in response to her question. She crossed her arms with a hum, as if only partially satisfied by that answer. "She's your girlfriend?" A little more reticent this time, Mike nodded again. She probably wouldn't buy it if he denied it.

Her curious expression morphed into a knowing smile that annoyed Mike on sight. "Aww," she cooed, pushing away from the island so she could reach out a hand to touch Mike's hair. "My baby boy is growing up..."

"Ugh, Mom..." Mike dodged her grasp with a groan. He was already regretting having started this conversation.

"Okay, okay," she relented, pulling her hand back and up at her side as if signaling that she wasn't going to try to touch him anymore. Then she moved to rest her weight against the counter again,

crossing her feet at her ankles and getting comfortable. Her gaze softened as she looked at him. "She moved away with the Byers, right? That must be hard."

Mike shrugged. "I guess," he admitted in a mumble, but he wasn't about to give his mother a detailed description of everything he was feeling now that El was gone. Just going to someone else for advice was already awkward enough. "How was it for you?" Then he cringed. "It wasn't Dad, was it?"

His mom chuckled. "No, it was someone else." She took a deep breath before she started recounting the story. "We dated for a couple of years in college. He was a year older than me, so when I was a senior, he had already graduated."

Her gaze was lost somewhere far away, a small smile on her face as if she was lost in a pleasant memory. It was super weird to imagine his mother having a life before... well, before *them*, but she seemed to recall this college boyfriend of hers with fondness, so maybe some good advice could come out of this, after all. "He was an artist. As soon as he got his diploma, he moved to Europe to follow his dreams. I stayed behind to finish school."

She sighed, an almost melancholy gesture, and her eyes focused slowly as she fixed her gaze on Mike. "We decided to stay together even though we were in different continents. Getting in touch with him was hard, but we made it work for a while."

It was the "for a while" that made Mike feel anxious. Obviously he knew this relationship his mother was talking about had ended somehow— she'd ended up marrying his father, after all— but he'd been hoping it wasn't the separation directly that split them up. That was what he was most afraid of when it came to keeping a long-distance relationship with El: that talking to each other would get more and more difficult with time, and eventually they'd talk so rarely and so shallowly that she'd get bored of being his girlfriend, or she'd forget about him, or meet someone else or something, and their relationship would crumble. He didn't even want to *think* about that possibility, but it was always there in the back of his mind; he couldn't help it.

"Is that..." he started nervously, wary of the answer he might get. "Is that why you broke up? Because of the distance?"

His mother seemed to notice that her words had upset him somehow. "Oh no, not at all!" she hurried to clarify, emphasizing the point with a wave of her hand. "My mother *hated* him. Said I was wasting my life with a guy like him. While we were apart it was okay, because I could simply not mention it to him. But he came to visit me in the spring and, well, I guess there's only so many snide remarks he could take," she finished with a resigned shrug.

Mike felt immediately relieved. So it hadn't been the distance that ended their relationship, just his grandmother being shitty as usual. Okay, awful relatives he could handle. Not that he thought his parents would ever hate El— she was too sweet for that to ever happen— but then again, if his mother ever found out the truth about everything they'd been through that he'd kept from them...

No, no need to freak out about that now. At this point it was irrelevant, and he hoped it stayed a non-issue forever. At least his mother had given him *some* reassurance that distance wasn't always a death sentence for a relationship. That was good. "So how did you deal with it, then?" he asked, a little more relaxed. "The separation, I mean."

His mother smiled again, clearly remembering something fondly. "Well, my college boyfriend used to send me letters..." From her expression Mike figured that this was something she thought was sweet or romantic, but he just couldn't see much use in it.

He frowned, his face scrunching up at the thought. "Why would I communicate by mail when we have telephones now?" he asked, honestly befuddled. Write something, only for it to take *days* for her to read it? And then have to wait even longer to get a response? That wasn't any better than what he was doing now; it was worse.

His mom looked offended for a moment, but she was still smiling, so he knew she wasn't *really* mad. "Excuse you! We had phones when I was in college, too," she pointed out, shaking her head as if in disbelief at Mike's cheekiness. "We did talk on the phone when we could, but it was hard because of the time difference and our busy

schedules. Plus, long-distance calls are expensive, as I'm sure you know." She gave him a pointed look. She'd already made it clear on the week the Byers left Hawkins that any long-distance phone charges, Mike would have to pay from his allowance. It was another reason why he preferred using Cerebro even if he had to climb up a huge hill to do so, although Cerebro still didn't solve some of the other problems regular phone calls had.

"Besides," his mother added, "talking on the phone is nice and all, but you can never really say everything you wanted to say, right?" She posed the question in a contemplative manner, and almost unwittingly hit the nail on the head for Mike. Because that was the crux of it, wasn't it? It was amazing to be able to talk to El as often as he did, but no matter how long they spent chatting over the radio, how often, it never seemed like *enough*. Maybe he was just being greedy, but at least his mother seemed to think that was normal given the circumstances.

"Yeah," he admitted almost reflexively. It's not that he wanted to pour his heart and soul to his *mother* or anything, but these feelings had been bothering him for a while, and she seemed to understand, at least a little. "It's like... sometimes during the day something will remind me of her, and I want to tell her about it because I know she'll love that, but then when we're talking... I don't know, maybe I'll forget, or, like, it just doesn't come up," he finished with something of a helpless shrug. He'd never been the greatest with words, after all, though it always felt *easier* with Eleven, somehow (and she didn't seem to mind when he babbled off into a tangent, most of the time).

"Exactly," his mom said with a warm smile. Once again she pushed away from the kitchen island and made her way to the table, but this time she didn't reach for him in any way; instead, she sat down in the seat directly opposite of him. "So, maybe next time that happens, you write it down instead, put it in a letter, and send it her way. It's not as instantly gratifying," she admitted with a knowing nod of her head, "but I think it's really romantic, honestly. It's a way to show her that you're still thinking about her even when you're not talking to her."

That struck Mike as a great point. He wanted more time with her, didn't he? What better way to get that than to utilize the time *between*

calls to extend the conversation? Sure, as his mother said, it wasn't as satisfying because he couldn't get an immediate answer from her, but it was something.

"Plus," his mom added, signaling to him with her index finger as if to emphasize the point, "she can save your letters, and then reread them whenever she misses you." Her smile turned teasing, and Mike rolled his eyes, dodging her gaze, as he was sure he was blushing. He would never admit it to his mother, but the idea of El reading and rereading a letter he sent her sounded... really, *really* nice.

"Guess it wouldn't hurt to try," he conceded in a mutter, already starting to think of things he could write about. He stretched out his arms with a groan; his entire body still hurt from the climb, which only served to remind him that if he wanted to do this, he would have to climb up the dreaded stairs to his room for pen and paper. "Right," he said, more to himself than to his mother, as he pushed himself to his feet. "Thanks, Mom," he added offhandedly, turning away from her so he could head out the kitchen door.

"Hey," he heard her call, and he looked back at her over his shoulder. "How is she doing?" she asked, a concerned expression on her face. "After what happened to Chief Hopper, I mean," she clarified, and that's when Mike understood she was asking about El.

He turned and leaned against the doorway, his position only allowing him to give her a half-shrug in response. "Okay, I guess," he replied, sad to even be saying those words. He just wanted El to be happy, but she never seemed to catch a break. Bad enough she'd been trapped and mistreated in that lab for twelve years, then had to live in hiding for one more, but now she'd lost the only man who had been a real father to her. It wasn't fair. "She doesn't talk much about it, but I know she misses him."

"Oh, that poor girl," his mother said with a somber shake of her head, her tone equally sorrowful. After a moment's pause, however, she smiled at him, though the gesture was smaller and softer this time. "I guess it's a good thing she has you, then." Mike didn't know how to respond to that, but he was damn sure of one thing: he was always going to be there for El, whenever she needed him.

His mother couldn't hear his thoughts, though, so after a couple of seconds of silence she waved him off with her hands. "Go on, go," she said, signaling toward the stairs behind him. "I'll call you down when dinner's ready."

He nodded and, excited to start writing right away, quickly made his way up to his room. Leg pain be damned, he took the stairs two steps at a time.

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Hi, El,

My mom suggested that writing letters could be fun, so I figured I'd try it. Feels a little silly now that I'm doing it, honestly, so let me know if you don't like it and I'll stop.

So, there was something I wanted to tell you about when we talked today and I forgot: We're trying to think of a movie to rent this weekend. You know how Dustin insists we do that all the time now that Steve and Robin work there, but we go along with it because there isn't much to do on weekends anymore now that there's no mall. We can't decide which one to watch. Dustin wants to get Police Academy 2, but Lucas says there's no point to having an inside man at the video store if we're not getting R-rated movies. (An "inside man" is when you know a person who works at the place and can use their employee discount or break some rules to get you stuff you can't get otherwise). Max just wants to rewatch The Karate Kid again, but that's just because she wants to ogle Daniel-san. She says all girls think Ralph Macchio is cute.

I could do karate. I mean, how hard can it be, right?

Anyway, I thought I'd ask if you had any suggestions for movies. Maybe you could ask Will to tell you what some of his favorites are about, and then you could choose the one you think is most interesting. And then maybe we could watch them together. I mean, not together together because you won't be here, but like at the same time. That's kind of

watching it together, I guess? And then next time we talk you can tell me what you thought of the movie. I don't know, it's probably stupid. It's just not as fun without you and Will around.

Yesterday Mom asked me to stop by the store to get some stuff, and I saw they were selling a bandanna that looked just like the one in The Karate Kid, so I got it for you. That's the surprise I mentioned last time we talked. I was going to give it to you on Thanksgiving, but I figured since I'm writing to you, I might as well send it along with this letter. I know you haven't watched the movie so you probably don't really understand why it's so cool, but I know you like bandannas, so maybe you could use it for your hair or something. I'm sure it'd look pretty on you. Not that you don't always look pretty. I just thought you'd like it.

Let me know if you want me to keep writing to you. It sucks that it takes days for letters to reach you, I wish the post were faster. I wish I could talk to you more often. I wish you were still here in Hawkins. But it's great to know you're doing well, and we'll see each other soon, so at least we have that to look forward to. It'll be great. I can't wait.

Love,

Mike

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"I got your letter today," came El's voice through Cerebro's speaker, somewhat shyly, the following Friday afternoon.

"Oh. You did? That's awesome," Mike very nearly stuttered, surprised to hear that so soon. It was definitely faster than he had expected. "So, um," he started again, a little hesitant about her possible answer. He still kind of felt that writing letters was dumb and antiquated, but he was really hoping she didn't feel the same way about it. "Did you... did you like it?"

"I loved it," she responded straight away, no trace of uncertainty in her voice. She sounded bubbly and happy, just the way Mike had

hoped she would. "I'm gonna write back," she declared eagerly, and Mike was sure the bright smile that overtook his face at that moment would be enough to tell anyone watching him that he was completely, hopelessly, irrevocably in love with this girl. "Joyce can take me to the post office." There was a pause for a few seconds. "It won't be as pretty as yours, but..."

Mike shook his head, even though she couldn't see him. "That doesn't matter," he let her know, understanding right away that she was talking about her handwriting, which was still not great after she was deprived for the first twelve years of her life of any kind of proper education. She'd been working hard on her calligraphy during her lessons, he knew, but he also could tell she still felt a little self-conscious about it. "I'd love to get letters from you!" he assured her earnestly. "I'll be waiting for it. Hopefully it gets here as fast as mine got to you."

And that's how Mike found himself pretty much stalking the mailman every morning before school.

"Not today, young man," the old mailman, Pete, would tell Mike each day when he saw him waiting by the mailbox. Then he'd keep walking past the Wheeler house, or he would stop to drop off some envelopes, which would invariably end up being bills for his parents or more college catalogs for Nancy.

It wasn't until Thursday that something came in for him. Of course, that was the day he accidentally slept in.

"That's for me! That's for me, that's for me—" He all but ran out of the house through the front door, nearly bowling his older sister over, as she had gone outside to put her school stuff in the car and just happened to be there when the mailman made his appearance.

"Mike! What the hell—"

"Sorry! Sorry," he said, but his heart wasn't in it as he made to grab the small stack of mail Pete had just been about to hand over to Nancy. He quickly shuffled through the three or four envelopes before coming across one for him; even without looking at the return address he would've known who it was from, as El's handwriting was

very distinct.

He grinned. "This one's mine," he said, waving the envelope slightly before handing the rest of the mail back to Nancy, who was still glaring at him. He barely even noticed as he made his way back inside. Still grinning from ear to ear, he dropped himself on the living room couch and quickly opened the letter.

"Michael," he heard his mother call out to him, but he was too focused on the letter to look up at her. It wasn't very long— just one side of one page— but it was more than he'd been expecting. El's calligraphy really had gotten much, much better over the past few months. "Hurry up and come have breakfast," his mother continued speaking, oblivious to his lack of attention to her warning. "You're going to be late for school."

"Be there in a sec," Mike said, but the words were almost a reflex, as his gaze was still transfixed on the page in front of him. He didn't even notice when his mom moved closer and lightly ruffled his hair. He was so entranced he didn't even try to dodge her. He read and reread the words, feeling a warmth wrap itself around his heart. The same warmth he felt when he talked to El, when he made her laugh — it felt almost like she was right there with him.

Maybe his mother had been right about this letter-writing business. It wasn't dumb at all; it was actually pretty great.

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Dear Mike,

Sorry I don't have a present for you. I love the bandanna. I wear it as a headband.

It was nice watching The Karate Kid together but not really together. I liked the movie a lot. Ralph Machio (don't know how to spell it) is cute, but you're cuter.

You're my favorite. Even if you don't do karate.

I miss you. I love you.

El

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Notes: As an older millennial, I feel obligated to mention that, as much as we love to romanticize communication via snail mail these days, having to wait days or even weeks to communicate with someone was just as frustrating in the 80s and 90s as it is today, honestly. Probably a bit slower, even. Thank God for email and texting and cell phones and instant gratification. (Mike gets me. He does.)

The Karate Kid is a 1984 martial arts movie featuring Ralph Macchio and the late Pat Morita. It spawned a franchise including three sequels (but we don't talk about those), and even a recent sequel series, *Cobra Kai*, which is still running on Youtube Premium and has garnered lots of critical acclaim. The original is pretty much required viewing if you love *Stranger Things*, so be sure to get to it if you haven't yet. *Police Academy 2* is the second entry in the *Police Academy* comedy franchise starring Steve Guttenberg; it's really not as good as the first one if you ask me, though. It opened in theaters in March 1985.

Your eyes do not deceive you: I live! Well, momentarily, at least. I'm still crazy busy, but season 3 did give me a few ideas which I will try to write out if I have time. Admittedly that's hard to find for a PhD student, however, so please don't expect new fics every other week or anything. Speaking of season 3, though, how great was it?! I loved it so much, my review of it on my vlog is so damn long I had to split it into two videos. But I really, really loved it. I've already watched the whole thing three times (what can I say, sometimes trans-Pacific travel has its perks). By the way, bless the Duffers for bringing back the Karen Wheeler I've always known and loved! Her scene with Nancy was one of my favorites of the season and directly inspired

this story, if you couldn't tell.

I hope I haven't been away so long that my entire audience has gone AWOL! Assuage my anxiety, you guys: if you liked this, please do leave a review/comment/kudos, or hit me up on Twitter ([girls_are_weird](#)) or Tumblr ([girls-are-weird](#)) and let me know what you thought. See you soon, hopefully!